



AIRMEN *for the* AMERICAS

LACKLAND ACADEMY CONTINUES
60-YEAR TRAINING LEGACY

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A graduating student holds the coveted "IAAFA wings" he earned for completing training at the Inter-American Air Forces Academy at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas.

Walking silently through thick brush and gnarled squat trees, the Colombian air force sergeant spotted his objective. Reacting quickly, his camouflaged face tightened around his stark white eyes as he looked at different members of his combat patrol, some from his country and others from El Salvador, Honduras and Chile.

The sergeant “spoke” softly to his team with a quick series of hand and arm signals. The patrol split. The right half headed through the brush, flanking the enemy that had been attacking their camp every hour.

As the Latin American warriors closed in on their mission objective, Tech. Sgt. Edward Benavidez closely observed their movement. Then the Inter-American Air Forces Academy instructor smiled as the students in this final ground-defense exercise opened fire, catching the “enemy” in a deadly crossfire.

“The academy provides serious training, some of the world’s best,” Sergeant Benavidez said.

Located at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, the academy has been

training students from Central and South American countries for more than 60 years. Today, about 600 students from up to 21 countries graduate from the academy each year.

The academy’s mission is to promote “inter-Americanism” and to “show students how the Air Force operates in austere environments,” said Sergeant Benavidez, an international force protection instructor.

“They learn how every other country’s military works — down to combat operations,” the sergeant said. “And they take the lessons learned and apply them back home.”

Airmen from other countries attend academy courses to learn combat skills, tactics and teamwork they might not learn at home. In fact, the academy is the only unit in the Air Force that teaches special weapons and tactics training.

In some cases, students get a chance to put to use the things they learn as soon as they get back to their home units. Colombia is one example.

“Colombia has actually been at war for the past 44 years,” said Sergeant Benavidez, a security forces NCO who has deployed overseas

three times. “So everything we teach them they apply very well to defeat armed groups and guerillas down there.”

That applies to the airmen from the other countries, too. Some countries, like Honduras and Guatemala, are waging war on gangs and narco-traffickers that have penetrated the countries. At the school, students learn how to more effectively combat such threats to their countries.

But at the academy, more commonly known as IAAFA, students learn more than security and combat skills.

Fountain of knowledge

The academy is unique in the Air Force. Its primary mission is to train and educate Latin America’s future aerospace leaders, in Spanish. It also fosters inter-American interaction through visits, engagement, education and training.

“IAAFA is an important Air Force instrument for the Department of Defense to provide international security assistance training. The schoolhouse offers a unique learning environment that allows students to focus on technical, operational and professional education,” academy



Air Force instructor Maj. Alexander Gonzalez (rear) helps an Ecuadorian major (left) and an Uruguayan captain (left), a guest academy instructor, during a training flight in an academy flight simulator.



Academy instructor Tech. Sgt. Alexis Adorno (right) explains some of the intricate mechanics needed to maintain jet engines with maintenance students from the Chilean and Colombian air forces.



A Colombian national police student leads a multinational fire team through the woods in search of simulated enemy during a security training exercise on Camp Bullis, an Army camp just outside San Antonio.



A Colombian national police student (fifth from bottom) raises his left fist in victory after he and members of his combat patrol found and eliminated a simulated enemy during a security training exercise at Camp Bullis.

superintendent Chief Master Sgt. Andres Alvarez said.

He said more than 100 Spanish-speaking military and civilian instructors and support staff show students how the Air Force accomplishes its mission.

“We’re creating future partnerships with these countries,” the chief said. “We help develop future leaders, technicians and instructors and foster pride and professionalism in these airmen. This is what they want and desire — and we’re here to answer that call.”

IAAFA has been answering this call since opening in March 1943, after Peruvian Gen. Fernando Melgar asked the United States to train Latin American airmen. Eleven Peruvian students were the first graduates from what was then the Central and South American Air School at Albrook Field, Panama.

That was the first U.S. aeronautics training in Latin America. The academy evolved in the 1940s, as the potential grew for conflict in the Western Hemisphere. The number of students increased to 400 per year. In 1952 the academy created the format that remains its foundation today. That plan stressed hands-on training, added officer courses and created a student section to provide military and athletic instruction and American cultural awareness — akin to a crash course in Americanism.

“We provide high-quality training,” helicopter maintenance instructor Tech. Sgt. William Cuevas said. “We face more challenges than helicopter maintenance. We must be experts in politics and history and be in good shape.”

Sergeant Cuevas said instructors want to expand students’ minds through hands-on training and by passing on their real-world and combat experiences.

But it’s not always easy finding bilingual Airmen to fill IAAFA jobs. So instructors often teach multiple classes, even as they travel with mobile training teams.

“We set the example as Airmen by interacting and encouraging students to excel,” he said. “It’s tough at times. But this is the most rewarding job I’ve ever had.”

While some U.S. Airmen roll their eyes when professional military education comes up, Latin American airmen don’t do that, Chief Alvarez said. They volunteer to attend because this training is often minimal in Latin American countries. Sometimes it doesn’t exist at all.

Some countries have requested the academy’s help in establishing professional military education academies and developing their enlisted corps. In March 2008, academy instructors traveled to Colombia to

hold their first NCO academy outside the United States.

Academy instructors say they offer more than other Air Force technical schools. The school supports U.S. national security objectives by maintaining a safe, professional, multi-lingual environment that nurtures students’ academic and physical development. And it provides students financial management, logistical, language translation and computer network maintenance support.

“We like to say we have two very significant parts to our mission,” academy commandant Col. Maria Cordero said. “We provide outstanding technical training in a quality, hands-on environment.

“We also have our inter-American mission,” she said. “That’s an unsurpassed mission where Airmen work together every day, get to know each other and help forge long-lasting international bonds of professionalism.”

This international vision of friendship and professionalism sometimes extends beyond the Western Hemisphere. As a bilingual academy, IAAFA has also taught students from Kenya and Yemen. In 2007,

the academy taught its first class of Kuwaiti students.

The family

To accomplish its big mission, academy Airmen stick together as a close-knit group they call “la familia” — the family.

“It might sound silly, but we really are a family,” said Master Sgt. Jesus Valdez, 837th Training Support Squadron superintendent. “We have such a diverse and important mission I don’t think we would be as successful if we didn’t support each other like family does.”

But it’s a small family and many Airmen know nothing of the academy and its unique international mission.

“Some people might say we’re one of the Air Force’s best kept secrets,” said Colonel Cordero, who was born in Cuba. “Because, though what IAAFA does is very important, you’ll seldom find anyone here saying, ‘I do this’ or ‘I do that.’ Our people choose to do great things everyday without fanfare.

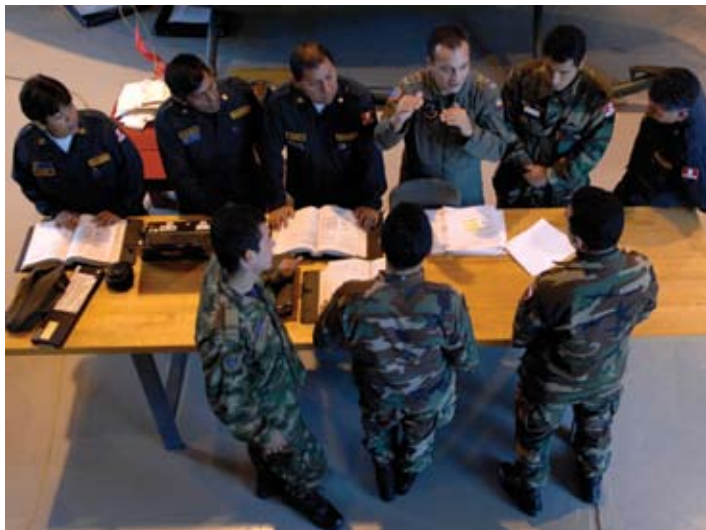
“So our biggest challenge — our most time consuming operation — is letting people know who we are and what we do,” the colonel said.

What’s important is that Latin American countries know, she said.

Wings of honor

The combat patrol marched through the Texas scrub brush at Camp Bullis, outside San Antonio. With their enemy defeated, the haggard students made a beeline for the security training center with Sergeant

“SOME PEOPLE MIGHT SAY WE’RE ONE OF THE AIR FORCE’S BEST KEPT SECRETS” — COL. MARION CODERO



A guest helicopter mechanic instructor from Bolivia (in flight suit) provides hands-on, on-the-job practical training to Inter-American Air Forces Academy students.



Students from a host of Latin American countries discuss the responsibilities of noncommissioned officers during a professional military education class.

Benavidez right behind them.

“They did it. Their hard work and dedication paid off. And together, they achieved victory,” Sergeant Benavidez said.

One of the squad’s Colombian commandos held up a scarred, triumphant fist — missing the thumb he lost to a flash-bang grenade in his homeland’s continuing war.

The soldier’s sense of accomplishment was evident as he shouted in Spanish, “We did it! We finally gave it to the enemy!”

As the squad marched away after the firefight, the commando kept his fist high in victory. Like the rest of his squad mates, he was proud of his accomplishments.

Back at the schoolhouse, a Colombian airman said he’s grateful for the chance to attend the academy. As he prepared to go home, the maintenance student said it was a fitting end to his three-years of basic training.

“I want to thank the Air Force for giving me — giving all of us — the

opportunity to come here and learn,” the airman said. “It has been an awesome experience. I learned about other air forces and developed a brotherhood with my classmates.

“And I have also been able to experience America. I’m thankful for what I learned and the way I have been treated in the United States, especially at IAAFA.”

At the graduation ceremony for the class, there was the traditional military pomp and circumstance. Then the students marched across a stage and received their IAAFA wings. The foreign airmen don’t see the coveted wings as just another professional badge. To them it’s a badge of honor.

“This training is so important,” said Bolivian Chief Master Sgt. equivalent Genaro Maydana, a guest maintenance instructor and IAAFA graduate. “This training will affect (the students) for the rest of their careers — the rest of their lives.”

That’s exactly what the IAAFA cadre hopes for. ✎



Graduation day (left) is a major event for everyone at the Inter-American Air Forces Academy. After finishing an intensive one- to 12-week training course, students receive a certificate that’s highly sought after and respected throughout Latin America’s militaries. Students also receive their coveted IAAFA wings, which most consider a badge of honor.

NO REGULAR TECH SCHOOL

The Inter-American Air Forces Academy trains officers and enlisted members from the militaries of up to 21 Central and South American countries.

Each year, up to 600 students graduate from the academy. Training is in more than 60 supervisory, specialization and technical-academic courses in:

- Aircraft systems and maintenance for OV-10A Bronco, A-37B Dragonfly, F-5F Tiger II and C-130B Hercules aircraft and the UH-1H Huey helicopter.
- Electronics, communications, intelligence, supply, logistics, air base ground defense, security, pilot instrument procedures, computer resources and information systems management.

The academy also provides professional military education for officers and noncommissioned officers with a mirror copy of the Air Force’s Squadron Officer School and NCO Academy, all in Spanish.

Courses last from one to 12 weeks. From 30 to 35 percent of class time is for academic theory. The remaining time is for extensive hands-on training.

The school has eight guest instructors from Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Paraguay and Uruguay.

— Airman staff